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ABSTRACT

Previous research on the difficulties faced by community college students transferring to four-year institutions has suggested that community colleges inadequately prepare students for the academic environment of their new institution. To examine transfer students' perceptions of their academic experiences and the causes of difficulties, interviews were conducted of nine urban community college students who transferred to a private university between 1987 and 1992. Student comments pointed to two areas of the university's academic culture that caused difficulties: certain teaching practices and classroom atmosphere. Four students reported an unwillingness on the part of faculty to provide assistance to offset their lack of background knowledge, which contrasted with perceptions of more supportive faculty at the community college. In addition, several students reported the absence of cooperative classroom interaction among students and between students and faculty at the university, attributing it to the increased sense of competition. Students who articulated a reason for the differences in academic environments usually pointed to the difference in student bodies, in essence perceiving the diversity of the community college students as a barrier to the quality of education provided. An analysis of the student comments suggests that differences in teaching practices could be a result of the pressure of the tenure process on university faculty, while the lack of cooperation between students could reflect the same faculty unwillingness. (ECC)

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University Practices That Hinder the Academic Success of Community College Transfer Students

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"Transfer shock" is a well documented phenomenon in studies of community college students who shift to four-year colleges and universities. Normed to the mores and educational expectations of the community college, these students experience consternation and distress when faced with different, and often more rigorous standards in senior institutions (Hills 1965). After the initial shock, usually manifested by a drop in grade point average, many community college transfer students successfully complete their studies and graduate from senior institutions. However, retention and follow-up studies provide conflicting evidence about the success of these students as compared to native students or students who begin their studies in a four-year college. Some single-institution studies indicate that community college transfer students graduate at a comparable rate (e.g., Townsend, McNerny, and Arnold 1993) while other studies, especially national ones, indicate that they are less apt to graduate (Astin 1992; Orfield and Paul 1992).

Why students who have succeeded academically at the community college may have academic difficulties at senior institutions is the subject of much speculation and some research. McGrath and Spear (1991) suggest a possible reason: They argue that community college faculty fail to indoctrinate their students in the cultures of the academic disciplines, thus ill-preparing them for success in the academic culture of four-year colleges and universities. Similarly, Richardson, Fisk, and Okun (1983) found in their ethnographic study of a community college district certain academic practices such as "bitting," or reducing complex material into small bits, that would presumably hinder students who transfer to a four-year college or university.

These authors fault the community college for certain academic practices deemed detrimental to the success of its students who transfer to the four-year sector. In contrast, in a recent case study I conducted, I found problematic aspects of a private urban university's academic culture. These aspects troubled transfer students from a nearby urban community college and presumably caused them academic difficulty. Drawing from data collected in this study, today I want to describe certain university teaching practices and a classroom atmosphere that some community college transfer students have found antithetical to the norms of community colleges and possibly detrimental to their own academic success at the university. I will then offer possible reasons why community colleges and universities differ so in their academic culture and

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This paper was presented at the symposium, "Community College Transfer Students and Universities: Problems and Possibilities," at the 1993 annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, held in Pittsburgh, PA.

faculty and student norms.

Data Collection and Analysis

To understand how community college transfer students viewed their academic experiences at the community college and at the institution to which they transferred, I focused upon a group of students who had transferred from a particular community college in a major metropolitan area to a private university in the same city. The students in the study were attending the university full-time and had transferred there between Fall 1987 and Spring 1992. None of the students had attended a four-year institution before going to the university in the study.

While my population was 44 students, only 21 students were still enrolled during the period I was collecting data. Nine of these students agreed to be interviewed by a female graduate assistant who was close to their age. These interviews were recorded and transcribed. I then coded their responses by themes and categories developed after several readings of the interview data (Straus and Corbin 1990).[1]

Findings

Faculty teaching practices. While the students were in general quite positive about their experiences at the university and found much to praise about the faculty, four of the students described rather disturbing classroom interactions with faculty when the students asked for academic help.

An Hispanic female spoke about the unwillingness of a professor to help her:

> [H]e was the worst professor I had ever had. This man should not be teaching. I went to him for help and he told me it was self-explanatory and that if I couldn't understand it, I should get out of his class. I was so furious! I never thought a professor could say that to me. I told him that he shouldn't be teaching.

A white female recounted a similar experience that had happened to her girlfriend in a physics class:

> [Her] physics teacher wouldn't answer any algebra-related questions in class. His response was, 'Go learn your algebra and then come back here.'

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[1] For more details about this study, see my paper "Community College Transfer Students in an Urban University: Survival of the Fittest?, presented at the 1993 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, held in Atlanta, Georgia.

Another student, an Asian international female, was also turned away by her instructor when the student asked for assistance:

> I never had Shakespeare in high school and so I thought, 'Oh, I want to try this . . . . So I took this class and it was a big mistake. It seemed like he expected us to understand the book and that was why we were in the class. And for me, I am a student, I want to learn, that is why I am there . . . . I went up to the teacher and told him I really didn't understand a thing, and the teacher just said, 'Oh, there is a counseling center.'

Another teacher ignored a group of students' request to teach the material in ways they could understand, as one Black male indicated:

> I had one teacher who was teaching a very difficult subject and he would just read it straight to us out of the book, and it was way over our heads. And then he would translate it into just as difficult terms . . . . Several students approached him about what he was doing, but he didn't change.

These incidents indicate that at least some university faculty were unsympathetic to students' lack of academic background upon entry to a course and were unwilling to give them assistance in learning this background. While the professors most likely did not know that the students asking for help were transfer students, the students were indeed transfer students, who were coming from an environment that they perceived as more supportive of their need for extra help. For example, students described community college teaching practices that reflected sensitivity to a variety of educational backgrounds. One of the international students indicated how the community college faculty, unlike the university faculty, gave mostly take-home assignments. She thought the university was going to have to deal with having more international students such as herself, who found it "hard to improve because you don't have time to work things through when you can only do them during class." Another student preferred the community college faculty's approach of doing in-class work, where

> 'we'd work things out together. At [the university] it's lecture and you take things home and do it yourself . . . . They throw all this information at you. Then you have ten pages of notes and you sit at home by yourself.

In a related vein, another student indicated the solitary nature of university study:

> There are some teachers (at the university) that make the students understand, 'I'm not willing to answer questions

> --I'm giving you a lecture--take down notes--study on your own.'

Community college students who are used to a cooperative classroom atmosphere may be disturbed or "shocked" by university faculty's expectation that students should "go it alone" and learn the material by themselves.

Classroom atmosphere. When students were asked about classroom atmosphere, they invariably described it in terms of student interactions with one another rather than in terms of interaction with faculty. More specifically, respondents focused upon the extent of students' willingness to help one another and the respondents' own sense of comfort or discomfort in asking questions in class.

Several students indicated that the competitive nature of the university made students reluctant to help one another academically. One White international student compared the academic environments of the community college and the university:

> There is more competition [at the university] than I expected. At [the community college] you go to learn, there is no competition. Here I really feel bad for the students because there is so big (sic) pressure. I wish there was a way where they could help each other. . . . At [the community college] you can learn from everyone's experiences. Students are more encouraged to share in class. . . . At [the university] students aren't interested in helping one another.

An Asian female also spoke about the competitive nature of university students and how this made her feel:

> [University] students are more competitive. In some ways that's good because it makes you work harder, but it's bad because I don't want to get mixed up in that kind of atmosphere where I always have to watch out for myself, you know, watch my back because if I don't keep up to date someone is going to step over me.

A white female voiced her perception that students didn't want to help one another succeed academically:

> There's peer pressure to be on time at [the university]. It's not a teacher expectation. It's just that you don't want to miss any information because you're afraid to ask others for the notes.

Also, some students were reluctant to ask questions in class, not because they feared the faculty would find their questions "dumb" or inappropriate but because they were afraid fellow students would view them in this way. Students were seemingly more concerned about losing face with one another than with the

instructor. This concern was not mentioned when students talked about classroom atmosphere in the community college.

Student perceptions of why the two schools differ. How did the students made sense of the two institutions' differing academic environments? While students were not asked why they thought the two institutions' academic environments differed, some of the students' comments about the two institutions in essence blamed community college students collectively for any difficulties individual transfer students might have in the university. For example, an Hispanic male said:

> The caliber of students in [the community college] classes probably had a lot to do with the caliber of teaching. You had to teach to their level. . . Having lots of foreign (sic) students who couldn't speak English well prevented the teachers from going at a faster pace.

A Black male stated:

> Many of my teachers at [the community college] never got all the way through the syllabus by the end of the term. They went so slowly. I don't know whether it was the teacher or the student.

According to an Asian female,

> It's the students that make a difference because over there I was always considered a very good student, and I guess that's because everyone else wasn't that good of a student . . . . So I think the junior college needs to get more students who are more competitive or who have better grades. I don't think they have a good mixture of students over there. They are mostly not that well educated (before coming to the community college) . . . . I heard from my sister-in-law who goes to school there now that they are letting in people off the street.

One Hispanic male compared university and community college students:

> [University] students tend to be a lot more serious than [the community college] students . . . more goal-oriented . . . a lot more responsible . . . they also tend to be more intelligent for lack of a better word . . . more prepared for a college situation.

In other words, students who articulated a reason for the differing academic environments usually said they stemmed from a difference in the student bodies, with the university having better students than the community college. In essence, the great diversity of this particular community college's student body, and

particularly its large number of international students, was perceived by several of the native-born students as a barrier to the quality of education provided by the school. The university's student body, almost uniformly perceived as "so White," was considered to be a positive contributing factor to the university's high academic standards.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

What do we make of these findings? Obviously, they can only be suggestive, given the small sample size and the institution-specific nature of the study. With these caveats in mind, let me suggest the following.

The classroom incidents related in this study and the transfer students' perceptions of university students as compared to community college students suggest a very different academic environment at the university as compared to the community college. Why is this so?

One reason may be that community college faculty as a group are likely to hold different attitudes than university faculty about what a faculty member can expect of a student academically. Given their institution's open-door admission policy, most community college faculty generally emphasize the development of students' academic abilities. If a student does not initially demonstrate these abilities, faculty will work with the student to develop them. In contrast, university faculty generally expect students to demonstrate academic abilities initially and are inclined to fail them if the students do not (McGrath and Spear 1991). It is the student's responsibility to correct any deficiencies in academic preparation, not the faculty member's. In other words, many university faculty seem to be working from a Darwinian perspective: The academically fit will demonstrate their ability and survive, while the less fit will withdraw or flunk out (Boice 1992).

University faculty may reflect this attitude partly because it is how they are treated in tenure decisions. Those faculty who are deemed professionally fit get tenure; those who cannot demonstrate adequate abilities in teaching, research, and service "flunk out," i.e., they are denied tenure.

Perhaps because some of the university faculty in this study did not seem to demonstrate a willingness to help the less academically prepared student, the university's students were also not inclined to help one another. Remember that transfer students in this study were surprised at the competitiveness among the university students, a competitiveness encouraged by such practices as grading on the curve. I do not believe the university in the study is atypical in its competitive atmosphere. Williams (1973), in his discussion of transfer shock, indicated that the community college failed to prepare students for "university-level competition" (p.321), and Dougherty (1987) articulated a similar finding. What I find intriguing is such works is that the university is not faulted for being competitive; rather the

community college is cited for not being competitive enough. The possibility that cooperation rather than competition might be a better approach to facilitate student academic success is not addressed.

What this study suggests is that community college transfers, normed at the community college to a student-centered approach, may be confused and shocked when they face different standards and expectations at the university. Those who are able to rely upon themselves, not the faculty or fellow students, can survive. Those who expect help from the faculty and students may well be unable to survive in the university environment.

Implications for community college and university faculty include the following and are not limited to faculty at the two institutions of the study. At the very least, community college faculty may wish to convey to students who are clearly going to transfer that university teaching practices and classroom atmosphere may be very different from what the students have experienced in the community college. In theory, students who are in their second year of study at the community college could be led to a self-reliant approach to their studies. A practical problem with this approach is that many community college students transfer to a senior institution after only a year of study.

At the university level, faculty and administrators should be encouraged to reexamine attitudes toward faculty and students' responsibilities in the teaching-learning process. Are students expected to sink or swim? What are the values implicit in such an approach, and are these the values the institution wants to convey? If so, then perhaps students from community colleges should be given a special orientation session that will warn them of the need to be self-reliant at the university and to be competitive rather than cooperative with other students.

An alternative approach for university faculty is to incorporate Alexander Astin's (1985) model of "talent development," which emphasizes faculty and student collaboration in developing students' talents and abilities. Faculty and students working together to help develop students' talents seems a fitting paradigm for the teaching-learning process in a world where global cooperation, rather than competition, is necessary to ensure global survival.

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